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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the development and implementation of the VISUNET:CANADA Partners Program, an innovative, cooperative model of library service for blind and print disabled Canadians. The ultimate purpose of the model is to advance information equity for blind and print disabled individuals, wherever they live, by positioning the local library as the primary service point for access to information. It is a model based on cooperation and the integration of service to blind and print disabled individuals into the mainstream of library service. Topics addressed include: the role of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) Library; elements that help to make the partnership successful; the principles of the CNIB Library Advocacy Program; components of the VISUNET:CANADA program (i.e., a online catalog, a module that provides access to full-text Canadian newspapers and magazines, and a module providing access to electronic resources); key elements in the implementation of the partnership between CNIB and The Alberta Library (TAL); and what the partnership means. (Author/MES)

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Abstract

This paper discusses the development and implementation of an innovative, cooperative model of library service for blind and print disabled Canadians. The ultimate purpose of the model is to advance information equity for blind and print disabled individuals, wherever they live, by positioning the local library as the primary service point for access to information. It is a model based on cooperation, and more importantly, the integration of service to blind and print disabled individuals into the mainstream of library service

Paper

Introduction

"For the raindrop, joy is entering the river." ~ Ghalib

As we enter the twenty first century, the global trend towards strategic alliances has become much more than a management fad. For businesses, non-profit organizations and public services including libraries, it is a necessity. Whether it is called partnerships, consortia, linkages, or networks, this emerging phenomenon recognizes that there is substantially more to be gained by

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working together, than working alone and in isolation.

The VISUNET:CANADA Partners Program, a partnership between public libraries and library services for the blind, represents a model of library service that embodies a shift from competition to cooperation, from on-site ownership to user-driven access. It is a model that transforms the library's role from that of simply acquiring and storing collections to actively facilitating access to the world of information whether it be in digital format, braille, large print, text, or recorded format. The ultimate purpose of the model is to achieve equitable access to library and information services for Canadians who are blind and print disabled.

Background

To understand the context for the development of this seminal partnership requires an awareness of Canadian library services for the blind. Geographically, Canada is the second largest country in the world, with a relatively small population spread over ten provinces and three national territories. Public, school, and academic libraries come under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. While provincial and federal human rights legislation guarantees equitable access to public service for people with disabilities, there exists no national library policy or strategy promoting the right to library service for blind and print disabled individuals. The National Library supports a union catalogue of accessible formats, but does not function as a delivery network for information services to the blind and print disabled

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) Library, a private, charitably funded organization, has assumed a leadership role in the development and delivery of service to blind and print disabled Canadians. CNIB Library is the largest producer of accessible formats in Canada, and provides transcription services and postal distribution of materials to blind and visually impaired individuals across the country.

In the past, CNIB Library and public libraries have worked alongside each other, parallel streams in the delivery of service, both struggling to deliver equitable library service, but never merging. Ultimately, the blind or visually impaired individual was the loser in this equation. Seeking information or reading material, the library user would have to contact individually the CNIB Library in Toronto and/or the local library (academic or public). In both scenarios, the library services available are less than adequately equipped or funded compared to services for print users. To illustrate the point, at Calgary Public Library where I work, we offer our print reading community a collection of over 2 million titles. By comparison, for our blind and visually impaired community, we have available approximately 14,000 titles in accessible format. When you compare that to the print collection it represents .007% of the collection to serve over 4% of the population who have print disabilities.[1] Calgary Public Library, like many Canadian public libraries, is very committed to serving blind and visually impaired individuals. We do provide accessible formats, adaptive technology, an accessible web site and well-trained staff. But working in isolation and in a country that has no national strategy for providing service to the blind and print disabled, we fall short of what is required in an information age to adequately serve this growing community.

Clearly, in Canada, as in any nation where there exists the will and determination to provide equitable library service, shared resources and cooperative services must be part of the strategy in attempting to achieve

acceptable library standards and benchmark service.

Making the Partnership Possible

VISUNET:CANADA Partners Program was launched throughout the province of Alberta less than a year ago. This innovative partnership between CNIB Library and local libraries across the province would not have been possible even ten years ago. For this partnership to be achieved successfully certain elements were essential:

- Technologies that enable institutions to work independently yet be seamlessly linked regardless of geographic location. Industry Canada, a federal government department, has a vision and plan to make Canada the most connected country in the world. Through its Community Access Program it has been actively connecting all rural, remote and urban communities via the Internet.

- A dynamic shift in defining library service and resources as access rather than ownership. This shift had to occur in both publicly funded libraries and the privately funded CNIB Library.

- The launching of this partnership was made easier in the province of Alberta where a province-wide multitype library consortium has recently been established. The Alberta Library (TAL) brings together public and academic libraries with a vision of "universal barrier-free access to information and ideas, delivered in a dynamic model of cooperation extending beyond walls and beyond current levels of performance." Essentially, through TAL, one library card makes available the information resources of over two hundred libraries throughout the province. It means that there is no longer a territory for information. What exists in one locale belongs to everyone in the TAL network. This innovative interconnected model of service delivery expedited the addition of CNIB Library as an additional node of service that would expand the resources available to blind and print disabled individuals.

Defining the Partnership

The VISUNET:CANADA Partners Program was established through the leadership of the CNIB Library. In 1996, a steering committee of committed service providers and blind clients from across Alberta was brought together to identify and address the barriers to information equity as part of partnership development. The Alberta Access Project team adopted the principles of the CNIB Library Advocacy Program:

- **The "right to know" is a fundamental citizenship issue in our democratic society in Canada.** Blind and print disabled Canadians have the same right as their fellow citizens to publicly funded library service in their schools, colleges, universities, and local communities.

- **If a "book" exists, it is available.** Resource sharing among all libraries and information resources centres is essential in ensuring that resources in alternate formats which exist are readily available to blind and print disabled people.

- **Each individual's need will be recognized in serving the whole community.**Library service for blind youth will not be compromised for

library service for the growing population of older blind people. Choices must be made and resources focussed in managing the service.

- **Equitable access to information is a technical issue for blind and visually impaired people.** A blind person is NOT less able than others to access information and gain knowledge. Blind and visually impaired people require information, generally published in print format, in alternate formats -- braille, large print, audio, descriptive video, and electronic.

- **Information infrastructures must be "front-ended" with relevant technologies in order to achieve access equity for blind and visually impaired people.** Information technologies must be implemented at the stage of design/production/organization when the cost is marginal in comparison to the cost of retrofitting after the fact.

- **Braille literacy for blind and visually impaired individuals is as essential as print literacy for sighted individuals.** Blindness is censorship enough.

The planning and negotiation process for the partnership between CNIB and TAL was thorough. Questions such as "What do we want to achieve through the partnership?" and "What resources can be committed to this relationship" had to be resolved before the partnership could be implemented. The contract between TAL and CNIB was signed in October 1999, and will be reviewed on an annual basis.

What the Partnership Offers

The VISUNET:CANADA Partners program opens up a virtual library to blind, visually impaired and print disabled Canadian. It is a rich library that can be accessed from home , office or through the local library. Through VISUNET:CANADA the local library has access to three components:

VISUCAT - an online catalogue developed using MARC standards that provide information about the multi-format collection at CNIB Library. Through the catalogue, local library staff or clients can place holds, determine status information on patron loans, or check holds placed on materials for delivery to clients. Staff at local libraries can also use VISUCAT to register CNIB clients or modify the client's reader profile.

VISUNEWS - a module developed to deliver current, full-text Canadian newspapers, magazines and other publications through computer or telephone, in French and English.

VISUTEXT - a module providing access to books, encyclopedias, magazines and other publications available in electronic format in the CNIB collection or on the Internet. Through VISUTEXT a user with password access can download a document or electronic book and produce it in hard copy braille, refreshable braille or voice output.

The most tangible benefit of this innovative partnership is the expanded resources and services that the local library can now offer to their blind and print disabled community. However, of equal relevance, is the fact that through this partnership community libraries have had to really look at what they offer a growing print disabled community and begin to actively address the issues of inequitable service and resources.

Implementing A Successful Partnership

To ensure the partnership between CNIB and TAL achieves its full potential the following are key elements in the implementation:

- **training** - the partnership cannot work without adequate training of staff in the local library. The training program includes instructions on how to search and use VISUCAT, and the resources offered. Also, as part of the training, a blind library client spends time with library staff providing sensitivity training and reviewing accessibility issues.

- **integration into mainstream services** - an important principle of the partnership is that blind and visually impaired users should be able to visit any local library and receive access, directly or indirectly, to VISUNET:CANADA, and other sources of accessible formats.

- **advocacy and promotion** - to receive optimum use, community awareness of the partnership and the resources offered is essential. The partnership is promoted in schools, community newspapers, libraries and other venues. Also, promotion of the partnership is incorporated into training of new library staff.

- **evaluation** - the partnership is just in its first year of implementation, but evaluation of its use will be an important part of ensuring the program is effective.

What the Partnership Means

On the very day that Calgary Public Library launched its partnership with CNIB Library, a young blind girl walked into the local children and young adult's department and requested three books in braille. The Calgary Public Library did not have the books in the format she required, but because of the new partnership, library staff were able to immediately search VISUCAT and request the items. The next day the books were crossing the 3,500 kilometres to our young reader. This is how the partnership works: seamless delivery of service.

Since the implementation of the partnership, Calgary Public library has responded to many requests for materials in accessible format. These requests -- whether it be for current books on cancer, a biography of the poet Shelley, or an electronic text -- could not be immediately satisfied with the resources at the local level, but ultimately could be filled through the partnership with CNIB Library.

While the partnership is about expanding resources, it is also about choices and service. The partnership means that a CNIB client or any individual with a print disability can phone, e-mail, or visit their local library and receive personal service no matter where the resources are located. It means the integration of service for blind and visually impaired individuals into the mainstream of library service. As that blind six year old girl who first took advantage of the partnership said, "Now I can go to my local library with my family and select books for me too!"

Conclusion

This model of partnership between CNIB Library and local libraries in Alberta offers so much potential and promise. For people with print disabilities it is the promise of equitable access to information, reading and lifelong learning. For libraries, it is the potential to mine the resources of the global/electronic village and achieve a vision of a world library of accessible format materials.

[1]This figure does not include individuals with learning or reading disabilities. It is estimated, in Canada, that an additional 10 - 14 percent of the population have difficulty reading print material due to reading or learning disabilities.

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